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AUTHOR Thornberry, Terence P.; Burch, James H., II
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ABSTRACT

Teams at several universities collaborated in studies of the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency program in three cities. This bulletin presents the findings from the Rochester (New York) Youth Development Study (RYDS) concerning the contributions of youth gang membership to delinquency. The RYDS started with a sample of 1,000 boys and girls in the 7th and 8th grades of the Rochester public schools. The sample included more youth from high-crime areas and fewer from low-crime areas. About 30% of the youth in the study reported being a member of a street gang at some point. Results clearly indicate that gang members were responsible for most of the delinquent acts reported. Although gang members were only one-third of the RYDS respondents, they were responsible for 86% of the serious delinquent acts, 69% of the violent acts, and 70% of the drug sales. These findings underline the importance of establishing effective intervention programs for gang-involved youth. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) implemented a comprehensive response to gangs in 1994, with initiatives that include the identification of promising programs to reduce gang involvement. The Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Gang Prevention through Targeted Outreach program is an example of a gang reduction effort that is succeeding by recruiting youth into youth clubs in a nonstigmatizing way. Building its programs on a solid base of empirical research enables the OJJDP to plan multifaceted responses to youth gangs. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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OJJDP
Shay Bilchik, Administrator
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JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Gang Members and Delinquent Behavior

Terence P. Thornberry and James H. Burch II

This Bulletin is part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Youth Development Series, which presents findings from the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. Teams at the University at Albany, State University of New York; the University of Colorado; and the University of Pittsburgh collaborated extensively in designing the studies. At study sites in Rochester, New York; Denver, Colorado; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the three research teams have interviewed 4,000 participants at regular intervals for nearly a decade, recording their lives in detail. Findings to date indicate that preventing delinquency requires accurate identification of the risk factors that increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior and the protective factors that enhance positive adolescent development.

The purpose of this Bulletin is to present the findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS) concerning what portion of delinquency in American society can be attributed to gang members. It also discusses the response of OJJDP to the youth gang problem.

RYDS is part of OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (Causes and Correlates program). The findings presented here are excerpted from *The Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency Annual Report 1995–1996*.

Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency

OJJDP has been funding the Causes and Correlates program for 10 years. The three research teams, competitively selected in 1986, collaborated extensively in designing the studies, identifying key theoretical concepts, and developing common "core" measures for these concepts. Content areas addressed in the core measures include official and self-reports of delinquent behavior; self-reports of drug use; characteristics of the community and neighborhood; demographic characteristics of the family; parental attitudes and child-rearing practices; youth attitudes, school performance, and perceived consequences of delinquency; and peer delinquency and conventional activities. These collaborative efforts represent a milestone in criminological research because to date they constitute the largest shared-measurement approach achieved in delinquency research. This research will enable the three teams and

From the Administrator

Until now, no one knew what proportion of all delinquent and criminal offenses are committed by gang members. The findings of the Rochester Youth Development Study provide us with information related to that question, which has significant implications for how we allocate juvenile justice resources and respond to the growing gang problem.

According to the Rochester study, whose findings are summarized here, gang members account for a disproportionate share of delinquent acts, particularly the more serious offenses. These results clearly demonstrate the importance of not only preventing youth from gang involvement, but of intervening with youth who are already gang-involved and committing a disproportionate share of delinquent and criminal acts.

This Bulletin also describes OJJDP's balanced approach to the problem of gangs, which includes prevention, intervention, and suppression. The Rochester findings reinforce the need for such a comprehensive, coordinated response if we are to reduce the amount of delinquency and crime perpetrated by juvenile gang members. This research also reminds us that a solid base of empirical knowledge is crucial in our efforts to effectively counter the influence of gangs on our young people.

Shay Bilchik
Administrator

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the juvenile justice field to aggregate data across projects and replicate findings across sites. In addition to research for the common measures, each project also collects unique measurements that add to the findings from each site.

The research teams have interviewed 4,000 participants in the 3 cities at regular intervals during the past 9 years, recording their lives in detail. More is known about the delinquency, substance use, and mental health problems in this group of individuals than about any other study population in the United States. By supporting the collection and analyses of these data, the program has effectively created the largest data set currently available on young individuals growing up in inner cities from age six through the early twenties. The data from the three studies make it possible to examine many crucial questions pertaining to the origins of serious delinquency, substance use, and mental health problems. This Bulletin focuses on one of those questions: How much of the delinquency in America can be attributed to gang members?

Prior Research on Gang Members and Delinquency

Research has demonstrated that adolescents who join street gangs are more involved in delinquent acts than are adolescents who do not join such gangs. This is especially true for serious and violent delinquency. Moreover, the association between gang membership and delinquency has been observed from the earliest to the most contemporary gang research, including that of the Causes and Correlates program.

Despite this uniform finding, surprisingly few estimates exist of the proportion of all delinquent acts for which gang members are responsible; that is, although it is known that gang members have a higher rate of offending than nonmembers, the proportion of the total amount of crime that can be attributed to them is unknown. This is an important issue because, if gang members are responsible for a large proportion of all offenses, efforts to reduce the overall amount of crime in society will not be successful unless those efforts include effective gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs.

The Rochester Youth Development Study

The RYDS started with a sample of 1,000 boys and girls in the seventh and eighth grades of the Rochester public schools. To maximize the number of serious, violent, and chronic offenders available for the study, the sample includes more youth from high-crime areas and fewer from low-crime areas. The entire range of seventh- and eighth-grade students, however, is represented, and the data reported here are weighted to represent the total population. Data were collected at 6-month intervals from interviews with students and parents and from a variety of Rochester agencies including the schools, police, courts, and social services.

For the study of gang members' share of delinquent and criminal[1] behavior, the researchers first divided the respondents into two groups: "gang members" (youth who reported being a gang member at some point prior to the end of high school) and "nonmembers" (youth who reported no involvement in gangs prior to this time).[2] Based on interviews over a 4-year period with study participants who reported delinquent acts, the researchers estimated the total number of delinquent acts by participants during this period, which covered their high school years. They then calculated the percentages reported by gang members and nonmembers. Percentages were calculated for a general delinquency index containing 24 items covering status offenses, property crimes, and violent offenses. In addition, percentages were obtained for subindexes referring to particular types of offenses.

Results

The results are displayed in the graph on page 3. The prevalence of gang membership in RYDS is 30 percent; that is, approximately one-third of the subjects reported being a member of a street gang at some point prior to the end of high school. In contrast, two-thirds of the subjects (70 percent) reported never having joined a street gang. If gang members do not contribute disproportionately to the amount of delinquency in society, they would be responsible for about one-third of the delinquent acts. In other words, gang members' share of all delinquencies should be proportionate to their share in the population.

The data in the bar graph indicate that gang members' delinquencies are not proportionate to their representation in the larger population. A look at the first section on general delinquency reveals that, during the 4 years covered in this report, 65 percent of the delinquent acts were reported by gang members. Thus, gang members account for twice as many acts of delinquency as one would expect given their share in the population. In contrast, nonmembers represent 70 percent of the subjects but account for only 35 percent of these delinquent acts.

In the second section of the bar graph, the indexes are grouped according to the seriousness of the delinquent acts. The disproportionate contribution of gang members to delinquency is greater for the more serious crimes. While making up only one-third of the study group, gang members account for 86 percent of all the serious delinquent acts reported in the interviews. They also account for 67 percent of the acts on the moderate delinquency index and 59 percent of the acts on the minor delinquency index.

The third section presents data by type of offense—violent, property, public disorder (for example, being loud, rowdy, or drunk in public), and drug sales. Gang members are responsible for 69 percent of all the self-reported violent acts, 68 percent of the property crimes, 60 percent of the public disorder crimes, and 70 percent of the drug sales. (This does not necessarily contradict other recent research that suggests a lower level of organized drug sales activity by gangs but does seem to confirm that individual gang members, as opposed to the "gang" as a unit, are involved in drug sales and usage to a large degree.)

Finally, the fourth section of the bar graph presents information on substance use. Gang members reported 63 percent of the instances of alcohol use that were reported during this 4-year period. They also account for 61 percent of the instances of other drug use.

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[1] Because at the later stages of the study some subjects were no longer juveniles as defined by the State of New York, all references to delinquency should be read as possibly including acts for which subjects could only be charged as criminal offenders.

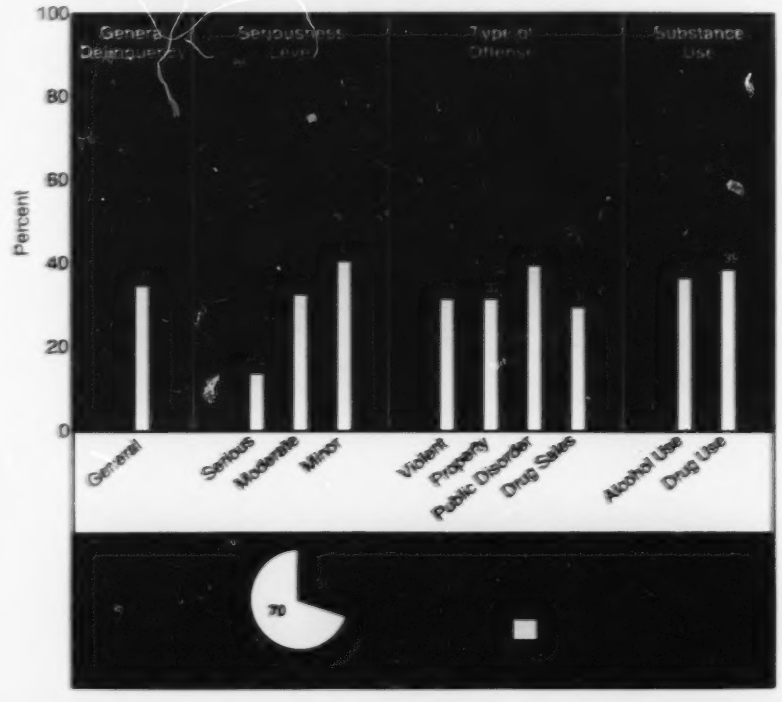
[2] Gang membership is self-reported. In questioning the subjects, researchers did not define what constituted a gang. The question asked was, "Are you a member of a street gang or a posse?"

Summary and Implications

These results clearly indicate that gang members account for the lion's share of delinquent acts, especially the more serious delinquent acts. While representing only one-third of the respondents in RYDS, gang members account for 86 percent of the serious delinquent acts, 69 percent of the violent delinquent acts, and 70 percent of the drug sales.

The findings of this report present a stark challenge to the American public. These findings underline the importance of establishing effective intervention programs for gang-involved youth because failure to do so may result in a failure to make substantial progress in the Nation's efforts to reduce serious, violent, and chronic delinquency. This is a difficult challenge, however, because many past efforts to combat street gangs have not met with success. Indeed, noted gang researcher Dr. Malcolm Klein has concluded: "The simple fact is that much of our local response and most of our state and federal responses to gang problems are way off base—conceptually misguided, poorly implemented, half-heartedly pursued" (Klein, 1995). However, as Dr. Irving Spergel, another renowned gang researcher, has noted, "What is past is prologue. . . . There are both continuity and change in the policies and practices that show promise in dealing with gang issues. The challenge is to create a new paradigm of action that modifies past approaches to make them relevant to current and evolving situations." (Spergel, 1995.) Spergel emphasizes that gang prevention and reduction strategies must consider the individual, the family, the school, peer groups, a variety of organizations, and the community—a view that is consistent with OJJDP's Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders. Moreover, according to Spergel, "New institutional cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional arrangements must evolve, and new policies and programs must be developed and then rigorously and widely tested, so that we will know what truly works and what does not." (Spergel, 1995.)

Percent of Delinquent Acts Attributable to Gang Members and Prevalence of Gang Membership



An example of such a programmatic effort that in fact has been and is continuously being scientifically tested is the Gang Violence Reduction Project of the Chicago Police Department (CPD). Since mid-1992, CPD's 10th District neighborhood known as "Little Village" has served as the proving ground for a program model developed under the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program, conducted by the University of Chicago with OJJDP funding support. This program appears to have had success in reducing gang violence and positively redirecting youth among the target population of Latino youth involved in serious gang crime and violence. The project's core team of workers delivers relevant services, provides opportunities, and carries out suppression strategies in a highly coordinated and integrated manner. This program was developed—and then consistently adapted—based on information from continuous planning and research efforts spearheaded by the University of Chicago. The integration of relevant problem assessment and research into the program development process is proving to be a key ingredient for successful outcomes. Positive results include a lower level of serious gang violence among the targeted gangs than among comparable gangs in the area. There is also noted improvement in residents' perceptions of gang crime and police effectiveness in dealing with it. In addition, there were fewer arrests for serious gang crimes (especially aggravated batteries and aggravated assaults) by members of targeted gangs as compared with control youth from the same gangs and members of other gangs in Little Village. In addition to these findings, many of the 200 gang youth involved in the program were referred to or provided with a variety of counseling, crisis intervention, job placement, family, school, and special education programs and services.

To summarize, the RYDS report and experiences in the field suggest that the United States can no longer afford "business as usual" in this arena and that the research, development, implementation, and testing of gang programs is perhaps becoming even more essential, given the proven impact of gang membership on delinquency and criminal activity. Renewed efforts and resources must be directed toward reducing the dominant role that gang-involved youth play in serious and violent delinquency.

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OJJDP's Response to Gangs

Over the past several years, OJJDP has placed special emphasis on gang prevention and intervention. Several factors are responsible for this focus:

- The reported growth in the number of gangs.
- New funding targeted for gang prevention and intervention under Title II, Part D of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended (Public Law 93-415).
- Interest and concern from the field.
- Findings of studies, such as the Causes and Correlates program and the Gang Suppression and Intervention program of OJJDP, which demonstrate the impact that youth gangs can have on communities and that gang membership has on America's youth, including a higher prevalence of delinquency, substance abuse, and other problem behaviors.

In 1994, OJJDP implemented a comprehensive response to gangs, consisting of five major initiatives:

- Establishment of a National Youth Gang Center charged with five major tasks:
  - Statistical data collection and analysis, including an annual national youth gang survey.
  - Analysis of gang legislation, which is being carried out in cooperation with the National Conference of State Legislatures.
  - Gang literature review, which has produced several products to date, including a master bibliography on youth gangs.
  - Identification of promising gang program strategies, several of which were featured at OJJDP's 1996 National Youth Gang Symposium.
  - Technical support in the coordination of gang program development, information exchange, and service delivery among Federal, State, and local agencies through the development of a gang consortium.
- A demonstration initiative, the Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program, implemented in five jurisdictions (Mesa, Arizona; Tucson, Arizona; Riverside, California;

Bloomington, Illinois; and San Antonio, Texas), which is building, in part, on the work of the Chicago Gang Violence Reduction Project described above. This multiyear effort to implement and test the comprehensive model developed by Dr. Spergel at the University of Chicago began in fiscal year (FY) 1995. Initially, the sites undertook the process of community mobilization, identifying or assessing the nature and extent of the gang problem and planning for program development and implementation in a problem-solving framework. Shortly thereafter (and in some limited cases, simultaneously), they began implementing appropriate interrelated strategies to target gang violence and its causes, while continuing to reassess the changing nature and extent of their gang problems. Strategies consist of a combination of community mobilization, social intervention and outreach, provision of social and economic opportunities for youth, suppression or social control, and organizational change and development to accommodate these strategies and help address the needs of gang-involved and high-risk youth.
- An independent evaluation of the OJJDP demonstration initiative. The 4-year evaluation project, which began in FY 1996, is assisting the five program sites to document program implementation and measure the impact of a variety of gang program strategies. The evaluation is also providing regular feedback to program implementors. The grantee is the University of Chicago, School of Social Services Administration.
- Training and technical assistance. To complement the demonstration effort, training and technical assistance are being made available to program implementors. Training and technical assistance plans are being developed for each site, and responses are being coordinated through OJJDP's Training and Technical Assistance Center. Specific training and technical assistance services are being provided by various OJJDP grantees and contractors, on an as-needed basis, in such areas as information sharing, community mobilization, and the gang problem assessment process.
- Targeted acquisition and dissemination of gang materials. In an effort to provide relevant and cutting edge information to program implementors, OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse acquires and disseminates youth gang-related information. As proven with the Gang Violence Reduction Project, the integration of research with program implementation is a key ingredient for success. Examples of information disseminated to date include youth gang literature reviews, articles on specific gang issues, such as gang graffiti; analysis of police suppression tactics; and other materials that are useful to program implementors who must be continuously aware of the evolving gang problem locally and nationally.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of America's (BGCA) Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach program is another key OJJDP gang initiative. Through a referral network that links local clubs with courts, police departments, schools, social service agencies, and other agencies and organizations, youth at risk of gang involvement are recruited into club programs in a nonstigmatizing way. The clubs also recruit youth through direct outreach efforts. Once in a Boys & Girls Club, youth participate in structured recreational and educational activities focusing on personal development to enhance communication, problem solving, and decisionmaking skills. Case management is an integral part of the program. For example, every month, staff document progress on specific goals, including participation in club activities, school performance, and significant achievements or problems (such as involvement in the juvenile justice system). The most important aspect of this program is that it gives juveniles an alternative to gang life.

Since the beginning of the Targeted Outreach effort, many encouraging findings have been reported. In the early

1990's, a process evaluation reported that once enrolled in BGCA, 90 percent of the youth attended once a week or more, with 26 percent attending daily. It was also found that a large percentage of these youth received recognition for in-club and outside civic activities and as many as 48 percent of the youth showed improvement in the academic arena. Specifically, more than 33 percent of the youth showed improved grades, and as many as 33 percent had better attendance (Feyerherm et al., 1992). Since this initial evaluation, BGCA has increased the number of Targeted Outreach sites to 157 and is continuing to document the success of the program.

One of Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Targeted Outreach "intervention" sites in Fort Worth, Texas, has become a major component of a communitywide approach to address gangs and gang violence. The City of Fort Worth's Comin' Up Program, which involves the Gang Task Force of the Citizen's Crime Commission, is designed to fill gaps in intervention services for gang-involved youth. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Fort Worth currently administers the Comin' Up Program and acts as a bridge between gang-involved youth and community services, opportunities, and government agencies. The project is supported through public and private sector involvement and funding, which includes more than $90,000 in "in-kind" contributions from the national BGCA. During a 4-month period ending in February 1996, more than 16,500 members and visitors participated in the Comin' Up Program, representing an average of 4,140 young people receiving services each month (*Comin' Up Gang Intervention Program Project Report*, 1996; *Coming' Up Gang Intervention Program Background Information*, n.d.). To learn more about the effectiveness of this program approach, OJJDP will fund an outcome evaluation of BGCA's Targeted Outreach program in FY 1997.

OJJDP's comprehensive, coordinated response to gangs is an example of programming that is built on a solid base of empirical knowledge. In comparison with other types of studies, longitudinal studies, such as the Causes and Correlates program, offer many opportunities to more clearly recognize and discriminate among key factors that lead to delinquent behavior. Additionally, longitudinal studies can play a significant role in shaping program efforts, such as OJJDP's multifaceted response to America's gang problem. Social scientists and policymakers generally agree that longitudinal studies are the best way to gain information on the causes of delinquency and on delinquent behavior itself, thus enabling decisionmakers to act on a sound foundation of knowledge about what does—and does not—work to reduce serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offending. OJJDP will continue to use this knowledge in supporting State and local efforts to reduce the negative impact of gangs while, at the same time, continuing to gather new information and research results for use in future endeavors.

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National Youth Gang Center
Institute for Intergovernmental Research
Post Office Box 12729
Tallahassee, FL 32317
904–385–0600
904–386–5356 (fax)
E-mail: nygc@iir.com
http://www.iir.com/nygc/nygc.htm

Terence P. Thornberry, Ph.D.
Hindelang Criminal Justice Research Center
School of Criminal Justice
University at Albany
State University of New York
Albany, NY 12222

Mr. Frank Sanchez
Director of Delinquency Prevention
Boys & Girls Clubs of America
1230 West Peachtree Street NW.
Atlanta, GA 30309
404–815–5700
404–815–5789 (fax)
E-mail: fsanchez@bgca.org
http://www.bgca.org

Terence P. Thornberry, Ph.D., is the principal investigator of OJJDP's Rochester Youth Development Study. James H. Burch II is a program manager in OJJDP's Special Emphasis Division.

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